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# AUGUSTUS CHARLES BERNAYS

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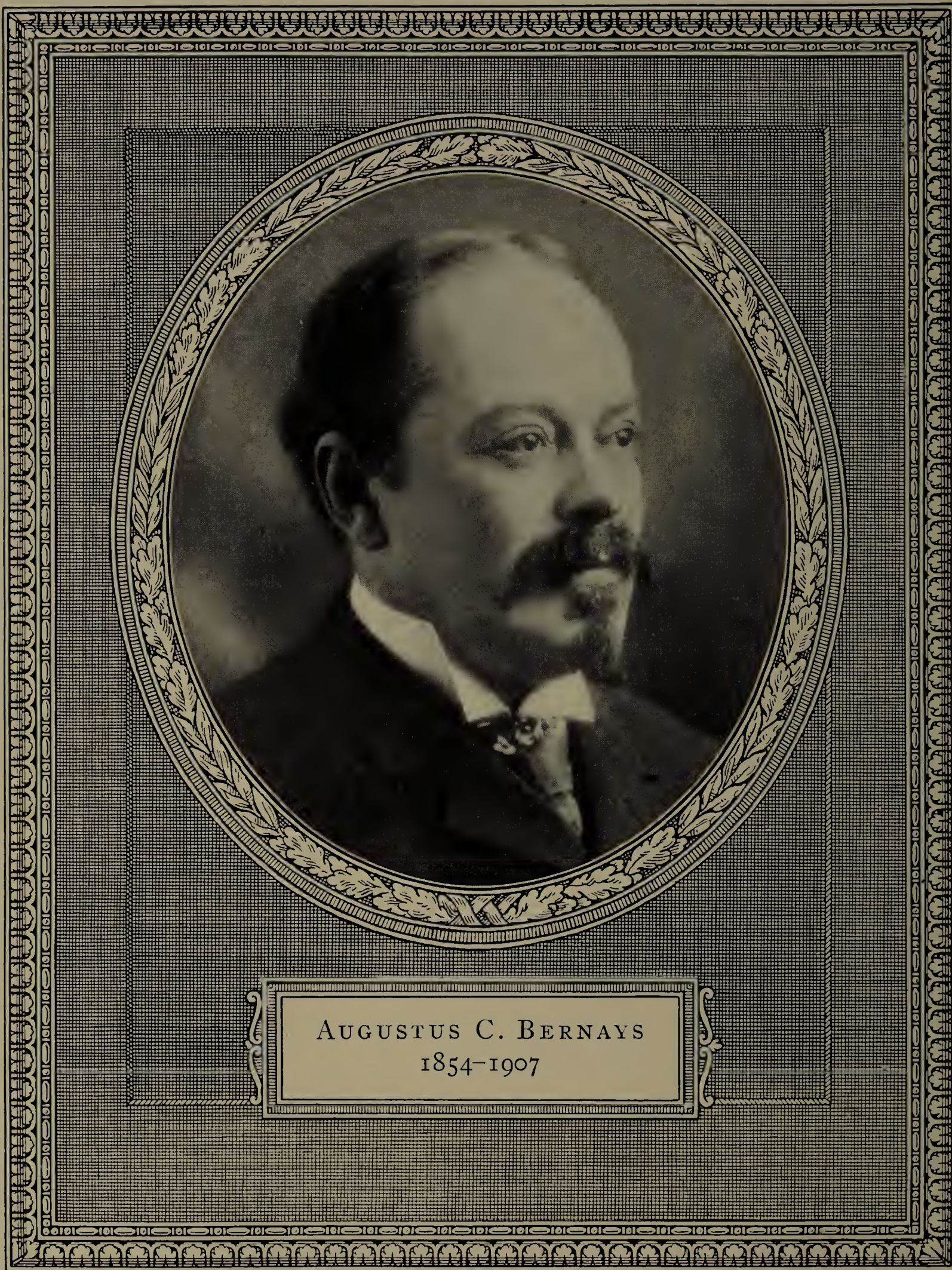
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AUGUSTUS C. BERNAYS  
1854-1907



## AUGUSTUS CHARLES BERNAYS

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BLESSED with a distinguished inheritance, with a most unusual mental equipment and with abundant physical vigor and afforded every opportunity for study, Augustus Charles Bernays entered the field of surgical practice.

Among his ancestors was a Bernays, Bishop of Calcutta; another, professor of chemistry at St. Thomas' Hospital; a third built the Chatham docks; one, Isaac Bernays, was consulted by Napoleon while formulating the code that still lives. Some of these early distinguished Bernays remained orthodox Jews; others were *getauft*. The parents of our own Bernays migrated from Germany to America in 1853; a year later, October 13, Augustus Charles was born at Highland, Illinois. At the early age of 12 he entered the preparatory department of McKendree College at Lebanon, Illinois, where his next 6 years, 4 of them in the college, were spent. His graduation thesis was on the "Darwinian Theory," a very early outcropping, it seems, of the interest in natural sciences later to mold his career.

He entered Heidelberg at the age of 18 where he completed the course in medicine. There he came under the dominating influence of Gegenbauer, professor of anatomy, one of that early group inspired by Virchow at Wurzburg in the early fifties. The youthful Bernays was student and later assistant of the distinguished surgeon, Simon, being the first American to receive *summa cum laude* when he finished at Heidelberg shortly after his twenty-second birthday. He then spent the winter semester of 1876 with von Langenbeck, in Berlin, and the following summer semester remained at Vienna with Billroth. He then went to London to observe the work of Sir Joseph Lister and others; while there he passed the examinations for M.R.C.S. He was occasionally entertained at the Huxley home where he was thrilled by meeting and talking with Sir Charles Darwin. A few months after his twenty-third birthday he entered the private practice of surgery in St. Louis.

He had entered Heidelberg only about 30 years after the Germans under Virchow's lead had initiated that epoch in surgery based on pathology. It had been only 12 years since Lister did that first operation of the antiseptic era; but a few months had elapsed since von Bergmann, whom he came to know extremely well, had introduced bichloride of mercury as more efficient than carbolic acid

(9 years more were to elapse before von Bergmann's steam sterilization was to replace chemicals and initiate asepsis). Furthermore he had been in practice only a few years when physiology became a fundamental to all surgical considerations; thus the stage was set for a resourceful young man in a changing era by Virchow, Lister, von Bergmann, Koch, and the others known to him personally.

He left his own mark on German medical science while under Gegenbauer's influence by producing at least three pieces of research work which anatomists say are considered fundamental to our knowledge of heart, joint, and thyroid development. I never realized how well known he was abroad until in the middle nineties Hertwig, the embryologist, said to me in Berlin, "You have certainly had a distinguished teacher in America; we consider Bernays' work on the heart and knee joint epoch-marking." That same year I asked von Bergmann, whose clinic I was attending, if he remembered Dr. Bernays of St. Louis; his rejoinder was, "Er ist mein lieber Freund." He seems to have reached the zenith of his fame abroad at the time of the International Congress at Berlin in 1890 where he read a paper, "Gunshot Wounds of the Abdomen," which was so well received that he was elected secretary of the surgical section.

He was 38 years old when I became his student, so I knew the last 15 years only of a life that was picturesque, useful, and stimulating to a superlative degree. Yearly trips to Europe had then kept him in such intimate contact with current developments in surgery that he was already working under the influence of physiology in his field.

In his late thirties and early forties his rapidly spreading reputation as a surgeon of unusual promise was based largely upon his ability as a brilliant, resourceful, and successful *operator*, the most difficult procedures being carried out without sacrifice of detail in an unbelievably short time. No local or regional anesthetic was available to warrant time-consuming operations; he used chloroform and naturally tried to cut down the dose and conserve the patient's resources by living up to the von Langenbeck inheritance from his student days when an operator had to be dexterous and a time-saver to get worth while results.

Versatility was one of his distinguished characteristics as shown by equal facility in the performance of the following: the Italian nose reconstruction, resection of all three branches of the trigeminal nerve, total resection of the mandible, complete amputation of the tongue, thyroidectomy, total excision of neck glands, gastrectomy, vaginal hysterectomy, resection of knee and elbow; while his reputation seems to have been made for those dependent upon current literature by such publications as this,<sup>1</sup> "Gastrotomy for the Removal of Swallowed Knife; recovery of the patient." Interest in him must have been vastly stimulated in 1888 by the publication of the first successful operation west of the Mississippi for bullet wounds of the intestine (its effect was certainly not lessened by St.

<sup>1</sup> St. Louis M. & S. J., VII, 9, 1887.



Louis voting the operator five hundred dollars for saving the life of the patient, a police officer). He was writing upon successful pylorotomy as early as 1887 shortly after Billroth's first successful operation of the kind; he was the first in America, too, to remove the entire stomach; he did the first cesarean section for placenta previa in 1894 and as early as 1901 was writing upon bladder drainage previous to successful prostatectomy. These and equally arresting titles appeared during the eighties and nineties under the general caption, unique as the man himself, "Chips from a Surgeon's Workshop"; indeed, his most virile years were productive of actions and ideas reflecting the fertility of an imagination handed down to him along with other oriental tendencies by a long line of Jewish ancestors on his father's side, his mother being of gentile birth.

Dr. Bernays as teacher was no less engaging than as operator or writer; he was an unconscious actor of ability—coming as he did of a race of showmen—which insured his classroom being crowded. He had had private instruction in drawing at college and his lectures in anatomy were profusely illustrated by blackboard drawings in colors made with chalk in both hands at the same time. Of course, the student was profoundly impressed by such a display as he always was when this artist did plastic work, switching flaps to a perfect fit without making a preliminary mark or indulging in any but the most cursory preparatory survey.

He was an extremist always in what he did and said, so now and then an amusing inconsistency appeared: he never failed in any lecture, no matter what the subject, to decry the use of drugs in the treatment of surgical patients, but years later when we operated upon the master himself he seemed wholly receptive then to powerful sedatives. Imagine the novelty of one lecture being punctuated by the teacher expressing his belief that no right thinking patient should submit to an operation at the hands of a man over 40; then when asked from the floor as to his own age admitting in confusion to having attained 39.

We had in our city during his best years no university medical source of authoritative opinion, hence it seemed natural for the newspapers to interview occasionally this outstanding surgeon on happenings of medical interest. This, in addition to frequent reports of his own arresting accomplishments, gave him a unique position in the public eye to the end that probably no physician of his time was known by name, if not by sight, to so many in our section of the Middle West. He was characterized by reckless optimism; he leaned a bit to the revolutionary; he detested hypocrisy; was possessed of boundless enthusiasm; was inclined to premature expression of opinion; was intolerant of commonly accepted rules of procedure; was unguarded in action and expression; was easily excitable; singularly ill-tempered, and unreasonable at the least show of incompetence in one of his team, but was equally contrite when he had cooled down and capable of a quality of generosity which is known in those who must at times compensate for a wholly unfair estimate of another's ability or character.

The vibrant Bernays, who so intrigued us in the eighties and nineties, was short of stature, stocky, dark, had a large head and prominent eyes, always in handsome clothes most carelessly worn, of most serious mien and day-dreaming when alone or unobserved, as he thought, was most approachable, affable, and genial with friends and casual acquaintances alike. His ready transition from work to play further illustrates his versatility. He was fond of night life as it existed in St. Louis 40 years ago; was a typical *bon vivant*, knowing just where to dine well; was the sort of dilettante that only a well-to-do bachelor could be; was one of our inveterate "first nighters" because of a real interest in music and the drama; was an art lover and collector as well as an artist at heart; indeed, the bachelor home which his gifted sister, Thekla, made more agreeable than a wife might have done, looked like a small public museum.

His chief diversion, if not relaxation, was found on the race track where he attended almost every "meeting" as long as the old St. Louis Fair Grounds remained open. He maintained his own racing stable where he not only bred and trained running stock but initiated all sorts of original procedures—all to no purpose—for rapidly developing his horses and increasing their speed beyond the ordinary, but in spite of occasional large winnings the losses incurred by this amateur owner practically dissipated professional earnings. Other owners, trainers, jockeys, touts, and bookies invariably played him for a "sucker" and a backer of "sure" things, still the genial Bernays grasping the spirit of all this unlike most others of his kind seems to have been tolerant through it all and to have displayed a saving sense of humor because for several years he had his racing journals, dope sheets, etc., mailed to a mythical Mr. J. Easy. Surgery was in the back of his mind even on the race track since his best known horses were dubbed The Doctor, The Surgeon, and Sir Joseph Lister. Another owner who admired him named a racer "Dr. Bernays" and our sportsman won the largest bet of his life, five thousand dollars, upon his rival's entrant, one of very few lucrative incidents to punctuate this all absorbing passion of his lighter side.

Bernays seemed particularly impressed by contacts with certain individuals while attending Congresses; one remembers vividly his returns from these excursions with expressions of admiration for C. H. Mayo, Howard Kelly, Furbringer (Gegenbauer's successor), Lawson Tate, Nicholas Senn, William T. Bull, Sir John Bland Sutton, and Harry Fenwick in particular; they always seemed to be his guiding stars.

He appeared up to the autumn of 1903 to retain his old time vigor; he surely remained extremely busy, then the handwriting on the wall became legible for even this buoyant optimist for after a camping expedition out West a slight stroke befell him; still, he made a rapid recovery and one of the heaviest professional winters of his life followed, then the summer of 1904 was spent in Japan. After a year more, being greatly improved, he wrote from the Alps that the



“stroke-like” symptoms of 2 years ago seemed to be “a thing of the past,” but in January, 1906, he broke down completely and a prolonged bed rest followed during which he wrote, “The Golden Rules of Surgery”; his professional publications of all sorts having by this time amounted to one hundred eleven. In a few months he was again strong enough to travel; he and his devoted sister made the last of their European trips in the summer of that year, but during the following spring there came anginal symptoms of ever increasing intensity. May 17, 1907, was his last day outside the house; then while reading aloud to his sister 5 days later he suddenly collapsed and expired in her arms—I had the empty satisfaction of being the first from outside to reach him after he was beyond help. Just as there had been nothing commonplace in his entire career so, too, he died from a ruptured aneurism of the left ventricle; he was then not yet 54 but had surely crowded much of dramatic intensity and spectacular beneficence into that brief span. The last rites, too, were out of the ordinary, to quote from his devoted sister’s, “Augustus Charles Bernays, a Memoir”: “They were of my own devising. He had casually expressed the wish that friends, and not strange, hired priests, give him the last salute, and so, amidst a great concourse of those to whom the name and the form of A. C. Bernays had been the synonym of high scientific and humanitarian ideals, F. W. Lehmann, jurist, and Dr. Carl Barck, physician, loyal friends of long standing, spoke of his life and of his service with the sincerity and the simplicity that were befitting. Then his body was committed to the flames.”

He was an ardent admirer of Colonel Ingersoll whom he had known personally and whose belief he shared to the end, so immortality must for him have meant the propagation of himself through that youthful group in whom his pride was centered—the Bernays school of surgeons, former assistants to whom he had striven to hand on the torch.













